

not a concession by either side, but a mutually beneficial exchange.)

On the same day that Obama announced his new Cuba policy, Raul Castro reiterated that Cuba has always been open to “respectful dialogue” with the US, but only on the basis of “sovereign equality” and complete respect for Cuban self-determination. He noted that as president, Fidel Castro had conveyed to the US on numerous occasions Cuba’s “willingness to discuss and resolve our differences without renouncing any of our principles.”

“Coexisting”

Cuba would continue to uphold these principles. Meanwhile, the US and Cuba “must learn the art of coexisting with our differences in a civilized manner.” In a speech to Cuba’s National Assembly of People’s Power on December 20, 2014 Raul Castro noted that Cuba has “strong convictions and many concerns regarding what happens in the US with respect to democracy and human rights”

and would like to discuss these concerns with the US.

Castro stressed that Cuba would not, in order to improve relations with the US, “renounce the ideas for which it has struggled for more than a century, for which its people have shed much blood and run the greatest of risks. In the same way that we have never proposed that the United States change its political system, we will demand respect for ours.”

To thunderous applause, he continued: “It is necessary [for the US] to understand that Cuba is a sovereign state whose people, voting freely in a [1976] referendum to approve the Constitution, decided on its socialist course and political, economic and social system.”

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A Primer on Gramsci, Culture, and Climate Change

by Dylan Harris

The slogan “Systems Change Not Climate Change” was popular in the London People’s Climate March. It denotes that people are increasingly aware of the intrinsic relationship between global capitalism and our rapidly changing climate. However, despite growing discontent about this relationship, it seems as though the capitalist wheel—self-aware of its connection to climate change—continues to re-invent itself at the behest of world leaders with vested interest in maintaining its status quo. By the way climate change is spun primarily as an economic threat on the 2014 UN Climate Summit’s website [1], it is no surprise that the conclusions drawn from the Summit encourage more economic growth as the solution to climate change. [2]

In this epochal moment—torn between the advancement of the global capitalist paradigm and the galvanizing effects of a changing climate—cultural politics, though often overlooked, is crucial for building a meaningful climate movement. From our consumption patterns to the way we perceive

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nature, our experience of capitalism reverberates on a cultural level. An approach to climate action—one that understands how intimately tied culture, climate change, and capitalism are to one another—is very much needed.

Cultural politics lies at the heart of Antonio Gramsci’s political theory. His work provides the tools for not only understanding the cultural depth of the current climate change crisis but also provides insight into what a more meaningful climate movement may look like.

As it stands, the re-emergence of Gramsci’s work has mostly been contained within the walls of the academia or deep in the wells of leftist political theory.

However, it is imperative that his work be explored within the context of contemporary issues and in relation to the people who are working on these issues on the ground. It is the aim of this article to do just that: to explore how his work is relevant and necessary to address something like climate change.

Gramsci’s political theory runs deep and wide, but three basic ideas—his conceptions of hegemony, absolute historicism, and philosophy of praxis—will help connect readers and activists with his broader work. It is not within the scope of this short article to go into too much depth on these topics. Instead, this article will use these concepts as tools to: (1) help situate and understand the climate crisis in Gramscian terms, and (2) piece together a Gramscian response to climate action.

Despite Gramsci’s name being synonymous with hegemony, the term predates him. Gramsci’s

interpretation of hegemony, however, is the most familiar. In short, a hegemonic society is one in which an ideology has become so normalized that it is difficult for people to imagine alternatives. A hegemonic system governs the day-to-day existence of people through the collusion of consent and coercion.

A hegemonic system comes into existence when a particular philosophy—say the idea that economic growth is good for climate change—is superimposed over what Gramsci terms *common sense*. Whereas a philosophy is more succinct, common sense can be understood as a constantly shifting discursive terrain upon which culture is cultivated. When a ruling class successfully integrates its philosophy into common sense, it becomes normalized through culture and becomes hegemonic.

Though hegemony is often associated with oppression, Gramsci's is written in the language of revolution. It is less an unstoppable force than a tool. It is a way of explaining how things currently are and how they came about, but it is also a blueprint for creating a better system. In the same way that a hegemonic system comes into existence, so could a counter-hegemonic alternative. In order for a movement to reach counter-hegemonic status, a philosophy must take root in the bedrock of what makes people care about issues. While making people care about an issue is admittedly the difficult part, Gramsci's *absolute historicism* puts the process into perspective.

Like other Marxists, Gramsci's political theory was designed around history. However, unlike Marx, Gramsci's view of history transcended materialism and was more concerned with the entirety of history. From an absolute historical perspective, reality is constructed and defined by the trajectory of past events. Thus, no idea is completely original inasmuch as it is the result of or reaction to something else. This also means that there is no objective reality or truth so much as there are multiple realities and truths for different people at different times.

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A hegemonic system, once it is entrenched, may seem immovable. However, an absolute historical perspective recognizes that no idea or system exists independently, meaning that any idea or system could take its place given the right historical conditions. Furthermore, an absolute historian understands that no revolution is final, leaving the future open-ended and flexible. The

flexibility afforded to an absolute historical perspective leaves critical space to create and re-create the conditions necessary to establish a counter-hegemonic cultural narrative. The process of creating and re-creating ideas comes about through a *philosophy of praxis*.

Though the Marxist philosophy of praxis also predates Gramsci, Gramsci takes it in an entirely different direction. Whereas philosophy is usually understood as something studied and produced by social elites, Gramsci's iteration of philosophy liberates it from its bourgeois context and delivers it into the hands of the working class. In Gramsci's mind, everyone—not just elites—is capable of understanding and creating philosophy, and the creation of a new philosophy lies at the heart of a Gramscian revolution. Gramsci's idea of

revolution begins organically in the hands of the working class: a bottom-up approach to creating a counter-hegemonic system to topple a hegemonic system.

A hegemonic system is characterized as having a governing philosophy—one that is usually created and produced by ruling elites with vested interests—that has been entrenched through its normalization in a population's common sense. However, common sense is discursive and created largely through day-to-day interactions. A *philosophy of praxis*—a philosophy based on day-to-day existence—is the synthesis of philosophy and common sense.

The discursive terrain of history provides the foundation upon which a revolutionary philosophy of praxis will develop and eventually take hold. The aim, then, is to find revolutionary ideas in “already existing practices of evolving subordinate groups” whose “political success rests on the attempt to turn such fragmented worldviews (always emerging from practical acts) into coherent world-changing perspectives” (Loftus, 2013: 193). The key to a revolution is to give people full agency and control over the process and allow it to develop and change organically as people change.

Now, with Gramsci's conceptual tools laid out, it is time to discuss them in relation to climate change. If there is a global climate movement at all, it is disparate and disconnected. Despite all the recent attention and support, climate action remains sporadic and vetted simultaneously by advances in climate science, occasional actions and protests, and ultimately governed by policies prescribed by the global superstructures of capitalism. In other words, the global climate movement exists largely within the parameters of the same hegemonic system that instigates the climate crisis.

On the topic of environmental perception, Loftus (2013:192) contends, “the ordering practices and discrete divisions of human and nonhuman that are expressed in language feed back into our construction of a world in which ‘nature’ is separated from ‘society.’ Ideology, here represented in the fragmented, incoherent realms of common

sense, has a concrete bearing on the ways in which reality comes to be made and environments experienced.” If our perception of nature developed in tandem with an extraction-based economic system—which eventually paved the way for capitalism—then it is no surprise that a rapidly changing climate coincides with the evolution of capitalism.

While the capitalist wheel continues to re-invent itself around a changing climate, it is crucial to recognize that there are other cultural narratives. The aim of this article to highlight how alternative cultural narratives are crucial for creating a counter-hegemonic dialogue to begin the process of not only addressing climate change but also building a better world.

While it is easy to valorize one environmentalism over the others, it is more fruitful to recognize that all of them are just as valid, as they developed in relation to one another. None of them is true for everyone so much as they are true for different people at different points in time. Through the process of praxis, it is possible to take all of these various perspectives into account to construct a cohesive counter-hegemonic narrative to topple and replace the current hegemonic system in place.

From Americans battling against fracking companies to monks practicing Buddhist ecology in Sri Lanka, there are multiple alternative *environmentalisms* that are critically different than the environmentalism that currently governs our daily existence. These narratives represent small blips in the Western narrative. They are necessary sand in its gears. They are friction that slowly etches

wealthiest hardly feel the impacts of climate change, with the exception of having to pay more for luxury goods like coffee [3] and craft beer. [4] However, as the climate continues to change exponentially, its impact will hit closer to home for the world’s elite.

As forecast by Marx, the system has begun to implode. Capitalism has created a crisis for itself, and may very well be in its death-throes. Even

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Thomas Piketty [5]—though less pessimistic about its collapse—believes that the future of capitalism depends largely on the ruling class’s ability to convince the rest of the population that the state of the world is acceptable. Because the level of global inequality is increasingly intolerable—and only exacerbated by climate change—capitalism in its death-throes will attempt to entrench itself further into people’s common sense. The future of capitalism depends on its ability to maintain its hegemonic status, while the future of the climate depends on the opposite. The future of the climate movement exists at a critical junction.

As capitalism drills deeper into our cultural bedrock in the shade of climate change, it is crucial that a counter-movement do the same. More than any other Marxist, Gramsci understands cultural politics and its transformative power. If our collective future depends largely on our ability to imagine an alternative to capitalism, then Gramsci’s work provides the imaginative prompt to begin that necessary process.

Notes

1. <http://www.un.org/climatechange/summit/>
2. <http://www.un.org/climatechange/summit/2014/09/2014-climate-change-summary-chairs-summary/>
3. <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/mar/28/climate-change-bad-expensive-coffee-ipcc>
4. <http://www.craftbrewingbusiness.com/ingredients-supplies/climate-change-alter-global-barley-production-solution/>
5. <http://www.thebaffler.com/odds-and-ends/soak-the-rich>

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away at the seams of global capitalism, creating the necessary space to imagine alternatives.

The aim of a Gramscian revolution is to create the conditions necessary to build a true alternative, one that engages with people on a cultural level. It is difficult to imagine what a counter-hegemonic alternative would look like. Perhaps nothing like it has ever existed to date. Gramsci (1971: 343) himself was unsure what a new world would look like, but knew that “the beginnings of a new world, rough and jagged as they always are, are better than the passing away of the world in its death-throes and the swan-song that it produces.”

A rapidly changing climate and its destructive wake are only one note in capitalism’s swan-song. Other notes in the swan-song could be growing global inequality or failing infrastructures. Like a song, all of them are interconnected.

It is no surprise that the world’s poorest shoulder the brunt of climate change, as they are most often located in low-lying and fragile areas. In the same way, it is no surprise that the world’s